

Belonging and Indifference to Europe: A Study of Young People in Brussels

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Belonging and Indifference to Europe: A Study of Young People in Brussels

Florence Delmotte, Heidi Mercenier & Virginie Van Ingelgom*

Abstract: »Zugehörigkeitsgefühl und Gleichgültigkeit Europa gegenüber: Eine Erhebung unter jungen Brüsselern«. This paper proposes to contribute to testing the hypothesis of a "drag effect of the habitus" and investigating empirically the significations of the "I/we/they" categories. It is based on "focus groups" organised with 35 young people in Brussels who were interviewed about their relations to the politics at different levels. It aims more generally at gaining a better understanding of how the feelings of belonging work, by focusing on the supposed lack of them and indifference regarding Europe today. The article firstly sums up what the "habitus drag effect" consists of, according to a certain reading of Elias's work. This section also aims at stressing how this idea from Elias although formulated in the 1980s is still stimulating to consider the EU and legitimacy issues 30 years later. The next section briefly reviews the recent evolutions in EU studies, the major advances and the remaining blind spots. The last and most important part is an attempt to illustrate how empirical material contributes to investigating these blind spots. At the end, the discussions with the young "Brusselers" partially validate, on the one hand, partially refute, on the other hand, and in any case enrich some of the propositions formulated by Elias's historical sociology, particularly around the "we/they" relationships.

Keywords: Norbert Elias, European integration, indifference, (feelings of) belonging, young people, Brussels.

1. Introduction

In his late text "Changes in the 'We-I' Balance" published in *The Society of Individuals* (2010 [1987]), Norbert Elias advocated that the resistance of old national habitus was the main impediment to the development of a supra- or

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postnational political and social integration (Elias 2010, 188). More specifically the national habitus drag effect would entail a lack of feeling of belonging at the European level (Elias 2010 [1987], 189; 201-2), a situation that Elias seems to deplore. Nevertheless, the sociologist as a “myth-hunter” is far from considering the increase of European feelings simply as a “good thing” in itself, or as a desirable development as such. Feelings of belonging are, on the other hand, hardly considered as something that people or institutions could choose, create or even deliberately foster. Rather, the author of *On the Process of Civilisation* (Elias 2012 [1939]) reminds us that, for centuries, modern states have *not* been nation states: in many cases, states have been for a long time deprived of a national “we” significance, for a majority of people did not identify closely with it. For this achievement, states required two developments that only occurred in the 20th century: democratization of citizenship (parliamentary representation of formerly excluded social groups such as workers), and mass wars (that fostered feelings of solidarity between nationals) (Elias 2010 [1987], 186; Delmotte 2012).

Yet, the European Union obviously and cruelly lacks actual democracy (Follesdal and Hix 2006; Miller 1995, 2000), as well as an external enemy that could have fed, like in the case of national integration, a European we-feeling (Debray 1994; Schnapper 1994, 45). In this perspective, it seems easy to conclude that such a double deficiency, more than the supposed complexity of the system, at least partly explains persisting indifference in the perspective of a number of European citizens towards the European Union’s institutions and politics. The point is not only to explain how and why people feel and seem involved “for” or “against” the EU, and what the result is for the EU. This question has indeed been broadly investigated from the 1990s by “mainstream” EU studies and by sociological analysis of the political parties. More recently, the questioning of how and why many people feel indeed hardly concerned, not really “sceptical” or consciously doubtful, but standing back, so to speak lagging behind, has appeared more and more crucial; notably in order to better understand a kind of passive and still often underestimated resistance to the EU (Delmotte 2008; Duchesne et al. 2013; Van Ingelgom 2014).

This encompassing hypothesis is one of those we came to test in the frame of a collective research dedicated to social and political legitimacy issues at the European level, with a special attention paid to (de-)regulation and free movement.¹ In 2013-2014, a series of focus groups (collective interviews) were organised with young people (16-26 years old) in six contrasted areas/neighbourhoods of Brussels (Mercenier 2016). These collective interviews aimed at better understanding how young people, citizens or future citizens,

¹ This study was supported by Université Saint-Louis - Bruxelles in the frame of a Concerted Research Action (or “ARC”, a Belgian research programme) entitled “Why regulate? Regulation, deregulation and the legitimacy of the EU: A legal and political analysis.”

consider the EU, Europe, European politics, and politics in general. Such an enquiry more generally contributes to fill in a gap. Big surveys like *Eurobarometer* often reduce opinions to a support/reject opposition based on closed preformatted questions (Van Ingelgom 2014) while traditional political sociology focuses on political parties' programmes and on electoral issues. A qualitative comprehensive and micro-sociological approach is by contrast more focused on how some people express their thoughts and feelings often in a more nuanced or contrasted way by talking with each other.

In a nutshell, this article aims at better understanding how the feelings of belonging work and to what extent they really matter, by focusing on the supposed lack of them and on indifference regarding Europe today. This objective is based on three approaches respectively held by the authors and complementing each other. The first is an attempt at questioning the political topicality of a classic exercise to think about contemporary Europe by transposing its propositions into the current context. The second approach takes part in the "sociological turn" of EU studies by going beyond partitions in terms of "pro" *versus* "anti." The latter is the enquiry that took place in Brussels to collect the ways 35 young people perceive or represent politics in general and the EU in particular. Therefore, the text initially summarises the "habitus drag effect" outlined by Elias. The second part briefly reviews the recent evolutions in EU studies, the major advances and the remaining blind spots. The last section illustrates how the empirical material contributes to investigating these blind spots. It more particularly stresses: (1) the different significations of the we-they divisions; (2) the place of the living experiences and the related emotions that emerge by dealing with political and European themes; (3) the scope and significance of the supposed indifference to Europe and/or Euroscepticism of young people. At the end of the paper, the talks with the young "Brusselers" met in the focus groups partially validate, partially refute and in any case enrich some of Elias's historical sociological propositions; particularly around the "we/they" relationships and the *relative* importance of an *affective* belonging, while affects and belonging are increasingly considered as very important both in the literature (Belot and Bouillaud 2008) and by (European) institutions.²

2. The Elias's Drag Effect Hypothesis

Before feelings and affects recently became fashionable in political analysis more broadly (Faure and Négrier 2017), the hypothesis based on the resistance

² The role of attachments, positive feelings and belonging is for instance evident in the discourse justifying the "European year of citizens" (2013) and through the "Citizens' Dialogues" set up by the European Commission in 2013 and 2014 (see Damay 2016, and Damay and Mercenier 2016).

of national identities had emerged in political theory and in EU studies in order to explain a specific kind of Euroscepticism or resistance (Coman and Lacroix 2007; Costa et al. 2008; Lacroix and Nicolaïdis 2010). Yet we have already stressed that more than twenty years before, in the 1980s, Norbert Elias had pointed out that national habitus were major obstacles to the development of a “real” political and social integration process at the European level, and with the emphasis on the affective dimension of such habitus, explained why they were so important and resistant. He further developed that point in one of the last texts he wrote, in 1987 (Elias 2010). According to him, the national habitus drag effect both entails and explains a lack of feeling of belonging to a broader entity – such as “continental,” or European, for instance. In order to grasp it properly, and to eventually understand what is new in this phenomenon, we would have to follow Elias in taking a step back into the past and to consider at least how feelings of belonging had been developing at the national-state level.

Elias more or less explicitly defines the “habitus drag effect” in the same text, *Changes in the “We-I” Balance* (2010, 188ff). This one is more of an essay, it does not refer to a specific sociological enquiry, but it mobilizes and consequently follows the main teachings of Elias’s historical sociology of the political. Sociologically speaking, in this piece Elias investigates further the problems of habitus in a long-term perspective. In a way, it is also one of Elias’s most politically engaged texts, where he critically argues – that is to say without illusion and in a disenchanted way – in favour of a post-national integration. Although European building is not the only or not even the main topic of this essay, he makes a special focus on European integration, which appears at the same time as a real political preoccupation to him and (unfortunately) as a good example to illustrate, or even to demonstrate, according to him, certain aspects of his conception of habitus. Elias notably writes:

[I]f we are looking for examples of the reality-congruence of the concept of habitus, we could hardly find a more cogent example than the persistent way in which the national habitus of the European nation states impedes their closer political union. (Elias 2010 [1987], 188)

In the following, Elias defines the “drag effect” as a “specific kind of habitus problem,” “somewhat underestimated on both the theoretical-empirical and the practical level” (Elias 2010 [1987], 188) and that depicts a

constellation in which the dynamic of unplanned social processes tends to advance beyond a given stage towards another, which may be higher or lower, while the people affected by this change cling to the earlier stage in their personality structure, their social habitus. (Elias 2010 [1987], 189)

Elias investigates perhaps most comprehensively the national habitus in another text, *The Germans* (1996), in a socio-historical but also comparative way. Thanks to the preface, we know that by using the term “habitus” (by which Elias “basically means ‘second nature’ or ‘embodied social learning’” according to Dunning and Mennell, 1996, ix), he precisely wanted to avoid using the

old and fixed notion of “national character.” Even when it appears relatively stable, habitus is always evolutionary and relational, but at the same time individual and collective; everybody has a unique habitus depending on their circumstances and the multiple roles he or she plays. The ones that interest us are a kind of them that although distinct cannot be cut from the others (at work, in the family life, etc.). Political and national habitus are particularly important because they concern up to millions of individuals and can seem eternal, as “something inherent in nature, like birth and death” (Elias 2010 [1987], 203). They truly reveal a huge inertial force indeed.

In the specific long-term and comparative perspective he promotes, Elias otherwise specifies that “[t]here are many examples of drag effects” and that the one just mentioned regarding Europe is

easier to understand by looking from a greater distance to analogous events at an earlier stage of development, that of the transition from tribes to states as the dominant units of survival and integration. (Elias 2010 [1987], 189)

By taking this distance, we can better understand and admit that the development of feelings of belonging is, par excellence, a “blind and unplanned” historical social process. It’s not that political leaders, institutions, and policies have absolutely no impact on it; it is more that they cannot “decide” or engender such feelings or habitus, nor can they shape them as they “want.” Even only “stimulating” or reinforcing them through specific devices or communication policies – such as one the European Commission has recently experienced (Damay 2016; Damay and Mercenier 2016) – partially seem nonsense. People simply cannot “choose” their identities or, more exactly, to what and how they individually and collectively identify themselves:

[I]n relation to their own group identity and, more widely, their own social habitus, people have no free choice. These things cannot be simply changed like clothes. (Elias 2010 [1987], 200)

Identities, habitus, and “we-feelings” rather refer to relatively slow adaptation processes that occur (or not, or that occur late in best cases) in a manner to “fit” the reality of interdependencies that evolve comparatively faster. More precisely, in the case of “political” habitus, these individuals tend to adapt to the political communities or entities – survival units, Elias says (2010, 2012) – that first derive from growing interdependence and a changing balance of power between groups (Elias 2012 [1939]; Delmotte 2012). On that, Elias writes for example:

The integration unit on the continental level may be understood to be a practical necessity, but unlike older national units it is not associated with strong we-feelings. And yet it is not unrealistic to suppose that in the future terms like ‘European’ or ‘Latin American’ will take on a far stronger emotive content than they have at present. (Elias 2010 [1987], 201-2)

We just do not know yet.

Why this relative uncertainty? The nation-state case may help in understanding the problem. For centuries indeed modern states have *not* been “nation states” with such strong we-feelings. As we already stressed, at first, states were “only states” – that is to say objective survival and domination units; not yet “nation states.” For long, states have indeed been deprived of a national “we” significance broadly shared by its members. They were not yet called “citizens” nor were they considered as composing “the nation,” which indeed is a very modern, contemporary conception, and a rather recent social and political reality. According to Elias, the transformation of states into the nation-state, that is to say into socially integrative units, only occurred in the 20th century, noticeably with mass wars that required full mobilisation of the people. But what is more original compared with the dominant literature, and quite unusual in Elias’s work indeed, is the emphasis he puts on the democratization of citizenship to explain this national integration process in most developed industrial countries (Delmotte 2012). To this respect, Elias came to reverse the usual way of examining the problem in Europe today, which often considers that feelings of belonging and identification processes come first. On the contrary Elias writes in the 1987 text:

The more complete integration of all citizens into states has really only happened in the course of the twentieth century. Only in conjunction with the parliamentary representation of all classes did all members of the state begin to perceive it more as a we-unit and less as a they-group. Only in the course of the two great wars of this century did the populations of more developed industrial states take on the character of nations in the more modern sense of the word and their states the character of nation states. Nation states, one might say, are born in wars and for wars. Here we find the explanation for why, among the various layers of we-identity, the state level of integration today carries special weight and a special emotional charge. The integration plane of the state, more than any other layer of we-identity, has in the consciousness of most members the function of a survival unit, a protection unit on which depends their physical and social security in the conflicts of human groups and in case of physical catastrophe. (Elias 2010 [1987], 186)

The last part of the quotation is as much important as the first. This function of survival unit that the state has “only in the *consciousness* of most of its members” (Elias 2010 [1987], 186), regardless of “how things stand in reality,” definitely matters. States may “threaten each other” (Elias 2010 [1987], 186), nation states may be revealed to be powerless in facing Tchernobyl kind of disasters (Elias 2010 [1987], 195). Yet the states still *represent* “survival units” (a “protection unit” on which would depend “physical and social security”). This is at the same time highly irrational, although Elias would hardly use this term (Elias 2010 [1987], 200-1), and of prime political and sociological importance when “the emotive need for human society, a giving and receiving in affective relationships to other people, is one of the fundamental conditions of human existence” (Elias 2010 [1987], 180). That is why he seems to deplore

that “for most people, humankind as a frame of reference for we-identity is a blank space on the map of their emotions” (Elias 2010 [1987], 181). Elias writes further:

The sense of responsibility for imperilled is minimal. Eminently realistic as such a concern may be, the habitus attuned to one’s own nation makes it appear unrealistic, even naïve. (Elias 2010 [1987], 203)

The first reason for this is that humanity “is not threatened by other, non-human groups, but only by sub-groups within itself”, while “at all other levels of integration the we-feeling has developed in conjunction with threats to one’s own group by other groups” (Elias 2010 [1987], 204).

Now, the contemporary EU would obviously be deficient in terms of actual democracy, perhaps since its foundation. It is the famous “democratic deficit” quite recently reassessed by Hix and Follesdal (2006; see also Weiler et al. 1995; Majone 1998; Moravcsik 2002). Europe would even more obviously lack a real “enemy” (Manent 2006; Duez 2014). Ultimately, this political entity was historically founded as an economic and peace project. In essence, people are likely to be indifferent to Europe because they don’t “feel” like Europeans. Europe is not a “we,” and that would be the problem. The lack of legitimacy of the EU would take its source there: there’s no European habitus that would be broadly shared by a majority, the people simply don’t “believe” in EU, and don’t behave accordingly, if we consider the minimal definition of social legitimacy provided by Max Weber (1976 [1922], Chapter III). That problem would have two sources. On the one hand,

the individual citizens who, in parliamentary democracies have painfully won the right to control their own fates to a limited extent through elections within the state framework, have virtually no chance of influencing events on the global plane of integration. (Elias 2010 [1987], 149)

And this has partly something to do with European integration, as part of a “global integration spur,” still “in an early phase” according to Elias in 1987 but which undoubtedly “increases the impotence of the individual” (Elias 2010 [1987], 149). On the other hand, and partly as a result, the resistance of national habitus, or the drag effect, could be finally be explained when

the emotional tinge of we-identity grows noticeably fainter in relation to post-national forms of integration, such as Unions of African, Latin American, Asian or European States. (Elias 2010 [1987], 183)

3. Advances and Blind Spots in Recent European Studies

The deepening of European integration from the beginning of the 1990s led scholars to investigate citizens’ relationship to EU in a context marked by the debate on the democratic deficit. In particular, studies dedicated to citizens developed and thrived in the peculiar climate that followed the difficult ratifi-

cation of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, and in a context of increasing interrogations surrounding the legitimacy of the EU. As the citizen became a central figure on the European political scene, the construction of a veritable community of researchers around these questions followed.³ Today there is a significant and well-defined body of work looking at the opinions and attitudes of citizens towards integration. It is important to look at their results in order to better situate what added value a reflection anchored in the notion of the *habitus* drag effect as presented in the first sections will have.

Within European studies, a consensus developed during the first period – from the 1970s to the 1990s – affirming that the legitimacy of the EU was, above all, based on performance or outputs based support – as envisaged by (neo-) functionalist theories. Citizens were assumed to perceive the integration process as legitimate to the extent that this process produced policies that they saw as having a positive impact, particularly in economic terms. The work of Gabel is particularly important here, paving the way for an analysis of support in utilitarian terms (Gabel 1998; Gabel and Palmer 1995). He defends the idea that individual attitudes towards European integration are the result of a rational calculation in which everyone weighs the economic costs and benefits of what he or she personally expects from integration. Although this assessment was initially near universal, the conclusions drawn from it varied considerably. Certain commentators affirmed that the European political system could only survive in the long term with this utilitarian support. Others, however, considered that legitimacy based on outputs is as fragile as it is fluctuating and that only legitimacy from inputs, based on the construction of a political community, would guarantee the stability of the European political system (Scharpf 1999). Thus, faced with the limitations of these explanations in terms of economic preferences, from then on, other authors have questioned the role of belonging to a political community as determining factors in citizens' support for European integration.⁴ As Duchesne argues,

in the space of a decade, research dealing with the relationship between citizens and the political system born out of European integration, have generally swapped an attitudes based approach for questions relating to identity. (Duchesne 2006, 141)

This second approach is not new,⁵ but in the 2000s European studies began showing a veritable passion for the notion of identity – and of belonging in the

³ This section is necessarily selective and important references are missing. The interested reader will find more references in Duchesne et al. (2013) and Van Ingelgom (2014).

⁴ For an overview of the literature on European identity, see the special issue of the journal *Politique Européenne* edited by Duchesne and, in particular, her introduction (Duchesne 2010).

⁵ Duchesne and Frogner posed the question of European identity as early as 1995. Their article both challenges the concept and situates it within a scientific context still marked by

following (Duchesne 2010). From this point, the idea that the affective relationship of Europeans to the new Union would gain strength and even compete with ties to their national political communities began to spread rapidly in the literature (Duchesne 2006). These questions of changing identities then paved the way for a third period marked by the issue of “resistance” to European integration – well-known under the notion of “Euroscepticism.” National identity is then considered as a factor that explains the rejection of European integration by some citizens (Carey 2002). However, numerous authors have questioned the idea that European identity develops in opposition to national identity; instead they suggest that these two identities are cumulative. According to Duchesne and Frogner, for example, we should distinguish between the sociological and political dimensions of territorial identity and consider the relationship between European and national identity in this duality (Duchesne and Frogner 1995, 2002, 2008).

In a nutshell, from the mid-1990s, there are two distinct trends in European research. The first pursues the exploration of support for integration with specific attention to utilitarian strategies that may be behind positive and negative attitudes. The other investigates the possible development of an affective dimension in citizens’ relations to Europe through the analysis of changing identities (Diez Medrano and Gutierrez 2001). At the same time, studies continue to focus on different levels of support by country, and on the different aspects of support, “instrumental” or “affective” (Lindberg and Scheingold 1970). The majority of this research is based on a series of questions asked in the biannual Eurobarometer opinion surveys that have been carried out from the 1970s by the European Commission.

By the end of the 1990s, however, European studies also experienced a methodological turn, which has been labelled as the “qualitative turn” (Duchesne et al. 2010, 2013; Van Ingelgom 2014). Starting from diverse but mostly comparative methods, this research also studies the relationship between European citizens and the European project. Relying on qualitative data (interviews and focus groups) and contrary to the established understanding of utilitarian and affective support, these qualitative studies converge in demonstrating the low salience of European integration for ordinary citizens (Diez Medrano 2004; Duchesne et al. 2010, 2013; Gaxie, Hubé and Rowell 2011; Hurrelmann, Gora and Wagner 2013; Meinhof 2004; White 2011). Those for whom European integration is an important issue, to which they refer spontaneously or with emotion, are the exception rather than the norm (Duchesne et al. 2013). It seems therefore difficult to analyse the discourses of citizens on the basis of the notion of “support” or of “belonging.” In short, or by default, the notion of “indifference” seems to best describe the relationship of a large portion of

the permissive consensus model, which was then only beginning to be questioned (Duchesne and Frogner 1995).

citizens towards European integration (Duchesne et al. 2013; Van Ingelgom 2012, 2014). European citizens have not only become more ambivalent but also more indifferent in the last couple of decades. There are limitations to over-reliance on a one-dimensional understanding of the change in citizens' attitudes to integration from support to rejection. These attitudes are actually far more complex, and it is necessary to take indifference and indecision into account, as well as ambivalence (Van Ingelgom 2014).

Ultimately, it would seem that European studies came to lay the foundations for a better understanding of emotions and feelings – and their absence – which make it possible to understand more intimately the relations that citizens have – or do not have – with the European political system. However, this is not yet the case. First, European studies have for too long remained dependent on Eurobarometer data and on the David Easton's analysis framework (Van Ingelgom 2014; Duchesne and Van Ingelgom 2015). The utilitarian support *versus* affective support dichotomy (Easton 1965, 1975) is easy to use with survey data. Conversely, the intensity of a feeling or its absence remains difficult to detect with these same tools.⁶ The use of survey data also contributes to maintaining a marked opposition between reason and feeling that does not shed much light on these complex issues. Second, if qualitative approaches have contributed to renewing sociological approaches and revealed among other things the importance of indifference among citizens towards Europe, the notion of indifference does not escape a certain theoretical weakness of European studies (Duchesne and Van Ingelgom 2015). This is why we propose (as illustrated in the following point) to complete the pursuit of qualitative research by investigating Elias's theoretical contribution and intuitions.

4. Talking with Young People in Brussels

This last section is built on an enquiry that took place in Brussels, at the heart of the EU. As already said, it is based on six collective discussions (focus groups) involving 35 young people (aged 16 to 26, having been at least socialized in Brussels since their childhood if not born in Belgium), held between November 2013 and May 2014.⁷ The focus on young people appeared particularly relevant, as they represent the generation that grew up in a mature and particularly debated Europe (Down and Wilson 2013). Moreover, Brussels is both an extremely dense political environment, with the presence of many political levels, and a cosmopolitan metropolis where different interpretations

⁶ For an exception see Van Ingelgom (2012).

⁷ The discussions took place in French. In order to guarantee anonymity to the participants, their names have been changed in the transcriptions and in the article, but we have tried to keep the origin of each name.

of belonging to a community might be experienced. These focus groups of three and a half hours each included 4 to 7 participants who did not know each other but lived in each case in the same area of the city (see Appendix). Considering the spatial segregation of Brussels (Kesteloot and Loopmans 2009), the choice of the neighbourhoods makes it possible to interview people with diverse socio-demographic features. Although gender and age balanced (for instance), participants shared similar social characteristics in each focus group so that they could talk to each other (Duchesne and Haegel 2004).⁸ Through this setting, the aim is not to establish representative samples, but to gather contrasted experiences of living and belonging in Brussels. Through the observation of the interactions between participants and the comparison between the focus groups, the structures of the meanings of (EU) politics were made visible. This methodology helps to shed light on “how points of views are constructed and expressed” (Kitzinger and Barbour 1999, 5). It makes possible to deepen their social constructions, as well as the meanings for a “group of citizens” (who for some, under 18, do not vote): young people. In a nutshell, these focus groups were conducted with young people from different socio-economic and cultural contexts in Brussels.

Three key strands emerged through the analysis of their exchanges. First, in relation to the question of belonging to a political community in the terms of a “we” compared to a “they,” the analysis reveals the expression of alternative positioning *within* the supposedly existing political communities (be it Belgium, Brussels Capital Region, or Europe). Second, it seems that attitudes of withdrawal when talking about politics are sometimes emotionally critical and/or negative, and that feelings are not especially, to put it briefly, synonymous of shared positive feelings (for example of belonging). Finally, as far as indifference is concerned, as usually defined by a lack of emotions, as a kind of “insensitivity,” it cannot be confused with an affective “detachment” (*Distanzierung*) in the positive and, sometimes, normative sense that Elias gave to this term (Elias 2007, 68-104). Contrary to indifference, the latter can favour a concerned but critical look and even something like a “detached” involvement vis-à-vis the European policy as some young people demonstrate as well.

4.1 I/We/They: The Importance of Inner Separations

Following Elias’s theory, one way of understanding how young people feel about belonging to a community, in the broadest sense of the term, is to look at

⁸ A set of six questions was asked in each group. Two questions were first put to the participants relative to the identification of collective problems in society and of the people able to solve these problems. Participants were then asked in the third question to comment on different political levels on the basis of photos representing various political institutions. The fourth question targeted the EU level directly. The two last questions were focused on the identification of “communities” young people feel a part of.

the “we-they” relationships. It is of course not the only dimension to take into account. Rather, the definition of the group’s boundaries, through the opposition to “the other,” is one of the elements from which the feeling of belonging can be constructed and analysed, even if other elements participate, sometimes even more centrally, in defining this “we” (Duchesne 2005; Delmotte 2008). The empirical material suggests that this articulation between a “we” and a “they” also leads to a positioning *inside* of a (political) community (as objectively defined as such as a nation state, but also as a region, a municipality, or the EU), especially by expressing particular demands on access to social benefits or about the relations between politicians and citizens.

Therefore, the “we/they” relationship is mobilized to claim a kind of priority over certain social rights “due” by the national political entity to those who, independently of their nationality, were born “here” or have been living here for longer, those who speak the language and who have worked here, unlike other people who have settled in Belgium (Brussels) more recently and whose country of origin has “recently” joined the EU. The presence of new Europeans is seen primarily as aggravating competition in the employment market especially for those young people who grew up in families situated at the lower end of the socio-economic spectrum.

Established and Outsiders I (Group discussion: Saint-Josse)

Lila: In the CPAS [the local public social services centres in Belgium]... The fact that they provide social services more easily, for instance, to *people from the countries that have just joined the EU* like, for example, Romania and Bulgaria. And so we see all these people who joined not so long ago... Well, yeah, it’s true, not so long ago, but we see all sorts, all sorts, people who come from Bulgaria, from Romania. *They’re* all entitled to social services *whereas a person who was born here, in Belgium*, and who, who...

Naima: Who speaks the language...

Lila: Who speaks the language... Who doesn’t have the means to really...

Jordan: Who even worked for his country.

Lila: That’s it, who even – that’s it. And who isn’t entitled to his rights, I want to say. Because it’s his right too. *We* were born here. *We* worked for *them*.

Jordan: It’s frustrating...

Lila: It’s frustrating. That’s also what I wanted to say.

These participants claim a certain exclusivity regarding the benefits linked to living in a national political entity – here Belgium – rather than expressing a feeling of belonging to this entity. This quote highlights the competition between different socio-economic “groups” within the European political community. The “we” mainly refers to young people who were born or grown up in Brussels (in Belgium) and the “they” refers to the foreigners or newcomers in a perfect accordance with Elias’s distinction between “established” and “outsiders” (Elias 2008). A differentiated membership (old, new Europeans or Bel-

gians) is used to claim rights, even within or between the migrant populations that nothing distinguishes but only the length of the social existence as a group in Belgium, the social age (the “oldness” of association,” Elias 2008, 4-5).

This observation does not exclude that some young people from these groups recognize that EU or third-country migrants are actually in the same situation today than their own parents or grandparents a few decades ago. They can understand them and identify with these newcomers. Nevertheless, the young Brusselers hardly consider that they belong to the same community and that the newcomers deserve the same rights. Nisrine (24, student in higher education) sheds a different light by explaining that the source of these problems is in fact due to the functioning of the economy. Without much success, she is trying to call for the common past shared by the young participating in her group in Anderlecht (they are all second generation of migrants as their parents have migrated to Belgium). She is doing this to enlarge the picture and to give a more comprehensive analysis of the situation.

Established and Outsiders II (Group discussion: Anderlecht)

Nisrine: Surface technician attention [laughs]. It does not exist anymore today. At that time, 30 years ago, it was our parents who accepted that kind of job. But now, we, their children, ah, now we have studied, et cetera. *We* all have different degrees. *We* also do not want to do that. So it will be Bulgarians or Poles, etc. who will come and seek this kind of job. So it's not really true that it's because of *them* that there's no more work anymore in Belgium.

It is worth noting that the national community is thus perceived as a kind of survival unit as observed by Elias – but in a rather emotionally detached way. Once again, that does not mean that young people especially identify with Belgium (which is in general the relevant level for the social security system in the Belgian federal state). To sum up, the question is then: Will the “we-feeling” tend to adapt to the political communities or entities that derive from growing interdependence and a changing balance of power between groups, namely encompassing all the young people looking for jobs in a free market EU and coming for instance, from East and South? At this stage, and related to this topic, the reference group appears more to be the type that believe they exclusively deserve the social rights and benefits: the people who were there (“here”), *first*.

4.2 “We” the Young People, “They” the Political Leaders

The “we-they” partition also refers to the partition between the politicians (“they”) and the citizens or the (young) people (“we”). This is particularly clear in the following section. Nisrine (from previous quotation) and Alexandre (20, in high school) describe what the pictures that were shown in the third portion of the discussion – picturing the town hall, regional, national, and European parliaments and through them the different levels of power – represent for

them. Nisrine expresses her difficulty to associate institutions with something she would feel attached to. At the very same time, it confirms that one can be a national of a country, one can be Belgian because one was born in Belgium, and do not feel attached to Belgium, to use Nisrine's words, "*inside oneself*." The subjective element, which is here associated with an affective dimension, in any case with a sensitive one ("*Do I really feel inside of me, really attached to all this?*") leads her to question her attachment to the national level at this point of the discussion, and a little bit later, to the European level. Thus, the national level is not better treated or viewed as more relevant for her.

An ambivalent feeling of belonging (Group discussion: Anderlecht)

Nisrine: For me, for me, these aren't only actually places [commenting on the pictures representing the buildings that house political institutions present in Brussels]. These are places but... when I see that, I wonder, "Myself, do I feel Belgian?" [laughs]. It's really the first thing I say to myself. Because I'm Belgian, that's clear. I was born here. But, do I really feel inside of me, really attached to all this? Am I committed to this country? Am I attached? I don't think so. [...]

Alexandre: I understand what you [Nisrine] mean. But at the same time, I know, it's weird, I mean, in all countries... even Americans who live near the White House, they see it and then after...

As it will be confirmed below, a distinction between "we" and "they" made by young people refers to a division between citizens and political elites. It is however worth mentioning that during the discussions, participants sometimes hierarchize the political levels (local, regional, national, European) – and thus their proximity or distance to elites – on a proximate-distance scale. When participants classify them according to the concrete character of their interventions, the local authority usually comes first. Administrative tasks give a particular traceability to the actions of the local political level. It is easier to understand why this local level is involved in their life, in the same way school and police do for respective reasons.

To explore the question of the place of affects when young people express their relationship to politics, one can be interested in a passage where Bilal (26, student in physiotherapy) talks about his "job" as a student for five years in the European Parliament. He mentions that when he met deputies, they barely said "Hello." Nisrine comments that representatives should always take citizens into account, even workers at the European Parliament. Yet Bilal explains that these people cope with the demands of a specific job. He does not use this personal experience as an example of a lack of proximity although, at other moments in the discussion, he makes clear that the collapse of the EU would be rather beneficial (because of the economic competition induced by free movement).

The rulers and the ruled (Group discussion: Anderlecht)

Bilal: Honestly, when bumping into the [European] deputies and all that, you could see that... because *we* were just there to Hoover the place, *they* weren't interested in *us*. Even just saying "hello," it was rare for *them* to say that.

Nisrine: Just goes to show, eh. [...]

Bilal: Me, I don't agree. I think *they* were just there to do their job. *They* weren't interested in those who were doing something else, you know.

Ilias: Yeah, that makes sense.

Nisrine: Although it's *us* that it concerns. So me too I find that ...

Bilal: *They* [deputies] don't see *us* as citizens that can vote for Europe, but more like workers who are just there.

In this section, Bilal does not merely expose a wound or denounce the disregard from the deputies, but notes rather calmly that these deputies "*do not see [those who clean their offices] as citizens who can vote for Europe, but more like workers who are just there.*" And other participants to conclude, as serenely: it is about "*us*"; it is up to us to "*prove*" them, and if "*we want to do something, to do it.*"

Thus, when considering democratic linkages between elites and citizens, from some participants' point of view, it is also the citizens' responsibility to decide to be involved. Louis (17, in high school, Ixelles) explains: "*If we distance ourselves from the politicians, there'll be no more democracy.*" The division between citizens ("*we*") and political elites ("*they*") is still crucial here but has to be considered in a different way. Indeed, a distinct representation of politics that emerges from the analysis of the data collected relies on young people's critical reflections on their own responsibility as (future) citizens. It is based on the idea expressed by some of the participants that citizens should be able to appropriate that world, by controlling and criticizing it, they should participate. In other words, if these participants voice discontent about the authorities' behaviour, they still adhere to the political regime or accept it, and don't contest its existence.

The following quotation builds further on this idea. When, in response to the fourth question ("What does the EU represent for you?"), participants discuss the meaning of the EU, they criticize the actual posture of EU actors rather than the idea of Europe. For Nicolas (21, marketing student), the EU is a clever idea, but the concrete actions implemented by political authorities are problematic. Following Nicolas's comment, Julie (24, social science student) and Théo (19, medical student) clarify their views. Earlier they had both expressed strong rejection of the EU, but they now distinguish between the idea of the EU, which they support, and the way it works, which they reject or criticise.⁹

⁹ This distinction between what the EU should be and what it does, so to say between ideas and experiences on the EU, has been underlined in a very different context by Van Ingelgom when studying ambivalence towards the EU (Van Ingelgom 2013, 2014).

Europe, “a clever idea” (Group discussion: Uccle)

Nicolas: It’s a pity [the fact that no one is interested in Europe], it’s a pity because... Yeah, there’s a good potential behind Europe. Basically, it’s a clever idea, it’s a good idea.

Sophie: Yes, but you see...

Nicolas: They did some good things, but now, well, as you say, it’s a bit like they’re – well, they’re kind of fucking with us!

Théo: Me, I think that Europe isn’t a bad thing in itself.

Nicolas: Oh no, it’s not a bad thing at all.

Julie: No, I’m not saying it’s a bad thing.

4.3 Indifference, really?

The distinction between “they,” the politicians, and “we,” the citizens, thus refers to a variety of reactions in the discussions, ranging from involvement to alienation; from apathy to “critical” citizenship. This section underlines that attitudes of withdrawal and reserve when talking about politics – as developed in the previous section – sometimes clearly appear as critical and emotionally negative, sometimes more constructive and “positive,” to a certain extent.

Indeed, some participants articulate a vision of a general incapacity to change how society works both individually and collectively, and an inability to identify concrete influences of political actions in their life. Political authorities could not fulfil their needs. These young people hold quite negative views about the rulers’ behaviour. Politics does not seem to involve them. These views can be better understood when one looks at the life experience of these participants, marked by social vulnerability and uncertainty for some who grew up in families on the lower end of the socio-economic scale. Their interpretative lenses of the political world are grounded in their experience. However, a diversity of views exists, as the following section shows.

Mariam (24, unemployed social worker, living in Molenbeek) cannot identify what political intervention is useful for. She says: “politics – well, everything related to politics – it doesn’t interest me at all. If it had been a sports club, yeah, I’d surely have joined, I’d surely know more.” She adds that “they are those who create problems sometimes.” She does not feel she should know something about politics or try to interact with the rulers, because she believes that this would not change anything in her life. Mariam comments on the European quarter in Brussels: “That’s where the European capital [is]. That’s where all – all the other countries of Europe get together.” But if a great distance is expressed in this discussion, it is not only regarding the EU level, but concerning all political levels, as remarked by Asma (17, in high school, living in Molenbeek): “The photos don’t speak to me, none of them does.” One would perhaps have expected that the presence of EU institutions in Brussels would have made the EU more accessible or more present. Yet, interestingly, the EU

presence is visible in young people's discourse, but mostly provides them with the opportunity to illustrate the gap between their world and the EU.

However this real *alienation* is certainly not the only form that distance takes, and, it seems, not the most important. Indeed, the distance can also express a critical view on what Europe is. While the young people are discussing the EU in Ixelles, Maël (25, with a high school diploma, odd jobs) argues that being able to travel around Europe is a real advantage. For her part, Inaya (19, student in economy) thinks that this is not enough to justify the existence of the EU.

EU and free movement: "What else?" (Group discussion: Ixelles)

Maël: Me, I find that in the zone we're in, it's cool because we can travel really easily from one [country] to the other, and I always have good contacts with everyone. And I don't feel like [referring to a person in a foreign country who could comment on him]: "Ah, he's from another country, I've got to be careful when he's there." Well, I don't know.

Inaya: Well, there was no need to call it the EU, then.

Maël: Well...

Louis: [inaudible]...

Inaya: I've the impression that that's the only thing [the freedom to travel] that is beneficial.

Maël: I like that.

Inaya: Well, no, it's great, but I mean, what else is there, you know?

Even if these participants consider free movement as a benefit of EU integration and a right they are able to make use of, it is not enough to justify the existence of the EU. This specific disconnection opens the door for a critical posture that asks for "more" Europe, in a way. This critical distance is even leading to a more "positive" attitude opening to a critical and constructive reflection in the next quote that is taking place in Uccle.

Does the EU "mean much"? (Group discussion: Uccle)

Théo: You're okay with that Julie? I also agree that [the EU] *does not mean much* [commenting on a paper that Sophie previously wrote about the EU].

Sophie: "It does not mean much." But at the same time, you [Théo] wrote many things [on the board facing them] [laughs]!

Nicolas: Yes, but me, the "does not mean much," rather it was based on the idea ...

Théo: It could represent 1,000 times more than that... I mean... It means nothing compared to what it should. *We know nothing*. Fishing [referring to a previous discussion on fishing policy] is something that I have, I had to read four years ago or something like that.

If the EU "does not mean much" to them, this expression of "not meaning much" is not based on an absence of effective knowledge as Théo evoked

many things related to the EU during the discussion. However, what is clear for them is that the EU should mean more, making clear that their reactions cannot be reduced to current Euroscepticism even if they are anchored in a critical distance towards the EU. On the contrary, they do perceive the concrete outputs of the EU, but these are insufficient to them; the feeling of “knowing nothing” that is mentioned by Théo fuels their distance. This aspect is well illustrated by Nour (19, web design student) when she comments on the question mark she draws on a card with Yusef (23, communication student) to explain what the EU is. The researcher asks what this question mark means to them.

“The EU is also big questions” (Group discussion: Jette)

Researcher: And why, what does it mean, your joker?

Nour: Because you [addressing the researcher], you asked what – what was – what the EU meant for us? Well, there you are. The EU is also big questions. So, quite simply that and then there are things I don’t understand. I’d need two dictionaries to understand. I, I’ve no way of knowing, I don’t know ...

Researcher: Although in the end, it’s in Brussels, the EU.

Nathan: That’s the problem. It’s that Europe is really distant from – well, from its citizens, you know. It’s something up there in the clouds [pointing to the sky].

Nour says that she is unable to understand how EU politics work. Nathan (26, political science diploma, unemployed) directly comments on her words by saying that this is a problem and this is somewhat proof of the problematic distance between citizens and the EU. Nevertheless, later in the discussion, Nour rather expresses a positive view of the EU:

For me, it’s [the EU] rather positive because I can’t remember – well, before the EU. I was far too young to know what it was like. I wonder if... we’re going to... be able to manage. I don’t know.

She mentions that the existence of the EU is somehow good by default, again underlying that this critical distance is far from being a purely Eurosceptic stance on the EU.

5. Conclusion

To briefly and temporarily conclude, the first series of analysis reveal that supposed indifference from some of the young people covers very different significances that are indeed irreducible to Euroscepticism. By talking with them, it appears that a majority of the interviewed young people in Brussels know more than they admit about Europe and politics. The discussions in the groups also reveal the importance of a “panel of emotions” (Delmotte, Merce-nier and Van Ingelgom 2017), which rely on personal living experiences, as Belgians, urban migrants’ (grand)children, workers or students. Young people

are also more or less attached to some European achievements or “outputs” (Scharpf 1999), and are of course more evidently disappointed by Europe’s powerlessness to solve the problems the society faces, such as unemployment for instance.

Regarding our initial hypothesis, particularly surrounding a national habitus drag effect, we observe that saying “we” about Europe still appears to be very difficult 30 years after Elias’s text. Young people do not seem to be particularly attached to Europe in an affective way. Yet, interestingly, they also do not seem to be more attached to Belgium, maybe more to Brussels. It can be partly due to specificities of the Belgian and Brussels’ contexts, but young people are probably less attached to the national level and more attached to Europe than the previous generation was. In that sense, the enquiry seems to confirm Elias’s intuitions: the European feelings have probably grown, but remain weak (Elias 2010 [1987], 201-2).

Above all, in regards to “us” and “them,” collective interviews with young Brusselers revealed that additional partitions are indeed more relevant. For them, the “we” often refers to “we, the young people,” or to the young people “living in Brussels” or “in this part of Brussels.” Additionally, the “they” does not necessarily refer to an external “enemy” or “other.” In particular, the USA and Israel are mentioned in some groups but most often the young people use the “they” to refer to European outsiders from South Europe (the poor) or East (the newly arrived). Even more evidently, “they” is used to refer to an inner separation between the politicians and the people (“we”), at all levels. In this, collective interviews also confirm an important idea expressed in 1987: all integration processes are marked at the beginning by a shift of power that begins by “increasing the impotence of the individual” (Elias 2010 [1987], 149). On the other hand, the research reveals, regarding young people, there is a certain potential for critical *self-detachment*, or for what we term a “detached involvement,” perhaps more necessary to any development of democracy in the EU than a still hypothetical European feeling of belonging.

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Appendix

The composition of the focus groups (FG) by area in Brussels (for the sake of anonymity, all names have been changed).

FG1 ¹⁰ Saint-Josse	FG2 Molenbeek	FG3 Anderlecht	FG4 Jette	FG5 Ixelles	FG6 Uccle
Naima (f/24) Lila (f/23) Leila (f/18) Jordan (m/22) Abdel (m/17)	Asma (f/17) Mariam (f/24) Odomar (m/17) Yassine (m/16)	Nisrine (f/24) Amina (f/19) Nabila (f/19) Alexandre (m/20) Ilias (m/18) Bilal (m/26) Waleed (m/17)	Catherine (f/23) Nour (f/19) Lucie (f/17) Gabriel (h/21) Nathan (m/26) Adil (m/21) Yusef (m/23)	Aicha (f/25) Inaya (f/19) Danielle (f/17) Isabella (f/22) Mun (m/20) Louis (m/17) Maël (m/25)	Sophie (f/22) Elise (f/17) Julie (f/24) Théo (m/19) Nicolas (m/21)
Lower end of the socio-economic spectrum			Middle end of the socio-economic spectrum	Middle and upper end of the socio-economic spectrum	

¹⁰ In the FG 1/2/3, most participants come from the second or third generation of migrants in Belgium (Pakistan, Morocco, Turkey, Sub-Saharan Africa).